

September 1998

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Lyman Newlin
Book Trade Counsellor

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Recommended Citation

Newlin, Lyman (1998) "Papa Lyman Remembers: The Battle of the Building," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 10: Iss. 4, Article 26.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2965>

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Papa Lyman Remembers — The Battle of the Building

by Lyman Newlin (Book Trade Counsellor) <broadwater.books@usa.net>

My life in politics began about five years before my life in books. As a past War (WWI) liberal “pinko,” I was a push-over for world peace, international fellowship, human dignity, etc., etc. Come to think about it, isn’t it strange how some of us change little or none at all? In 1928, as a college freshman, I belonged to all the right organizations, especially those which advocated everlasting peace with Germany. And why should I not have sworn eternal fealty to the land of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and the literature of Goethe, Schiller, and Heine (of whom I knew almost nothing until college chapel choir and organ) and German as my first modern foreign language so splendidly taught by Professor Helbing?

I wasn’t old enough to vote for my political hero, **Norman Thomas**, on his first run for the US Presidency as leader of the Socialist Party. It may be hard for present right-wingers to understand that Thomas was a rabid foe of Communism. Of course, I voted for Thomas and any other Socialist crazy enough to be on the Kansas ballot in 1932. With **Franklin Roosevelt’s** landslide into office that year, I became a Democrat and voted straight ticket thereafter, beginning in 1936 when FDR trounced Kansas governor **Alf Landon**, a personal friend of my father and probably as liberal a candidate as the GOP has ever fielded.

So there’s my beginning in Democratic Party politics. When I moved to Chicago in 1933, I was back in the state of my birth and home to five or six generations of both my parents’ ancestors: paternal side Democratic, maternal side Republican. There was not much room for a country boy in Chicago politics in the depths of the Great Depression. I do remember my friend, **Henry D. McKay**, one of our country’s leading sociologists of the time, remarking that Chicago had elected “reform” mayors in the early third of the century and both had died of heart-break.

But politics and books were a better mix for a bookseller near the **University of Minnesota** campus. When I arrived in 1944, there were many meetings between the Farmer-Labor Party and the Democratic Party. Eventually, they merged and became the DFL (Democratic-Farm-Labor) Party. I became vice-chairman of one of the DFL groups in my suburb and there’s not been much time since that I haven’t mixed books with politics. In passing I should say that I gathered some political savvy from Minnesotans who became nationally known Democrats: **Hubert H. Humphrey**; **Walter Frederick Mondale**;

Max Kampelman; **Evron Kirkpatrick**; **Norman Sherman**, who worked as a student with me in the **Minnesota Book Store** and later became press secretary to vice president **HHH**. I was a guest in the Sherman home during the recent **ALA midwinter** meeting. I have never been able to classify Norman, excepting to say that he is a writer, a foundation executor, a birder with a formidable life list and an encyclopedic source of US political science. In rural Cass County, Minnesota, which was my summer home during the fifties and sixties, I campaigned for Mondale for US Senator and was the founder and first president of the Bay River Chain of Lakes Improvement Association. Later, when I became the father of two sons, I became active in local school politics and was a founder and first president of the Freehold (NJ) Concerned Parents Organization.

With all this background, one should be coasting as a public library trustee, which I have been for the past dozen years or so — serving as secretary, vice president, and now president.

My trouble started when I supported a local Democratic Committee member as our candidate for Town Trustee Supervisor, in spite of his having no previous experience in any practical administrative position.

When it came time to appoint a liaison between the Town Council and our Public Library Trustees, the incoming supervisor appointed another newly-elected councilman who had not been friendly to the library. Our library building was dedicated at the beginning of 1990, a bit less than 10,000 square feet which was reduced by 2000 square feet by the Town Board. Of Georgian architecture consisting of specially made bricks, Indiana limestone, and DeVac windows, the building is a thing of beauty from the outside and with an interior which has been praised by visitors from far and near.

In the nearly eight years of its existence, this building has grown in need of enlargement because of tremendous increases in patronage and circulation. Children’s activities have more than quadrupled. A fulltime children’s librarian has been hired. The population is not booming, but it is holding its own, and the median age has declined enough to encourage more attention to the Electronic Age with greatly increased need for computers to access electronic resources.

It is this last fact which seems to have put our liaison person into a state of hallucinations. This person is a virtual chemist with an advanced degree. He has read and heard about digitization, has written and talked about the imminent demise of the printed book, and is

convinced that in twenty years libraries will be housed in Lilliputian buildings, because electronic gadgets and discs will be all that need housing.

Just to check this out I talked to **Tom Raines**, Deputy Director of the Charleston County Library which had just opened a brand new building. I supposed I’d encounter someone who was sitting in a building large enough to suit his needs. Not so — Tom is already feeling the need to add to the one hundred computers now housed in that new building. In a brief and lucid explanation, Tom figures that each computer requires 125 to 150 square feet per carrel. I concluded that if our library never buys another book but keeps up with the “Digital Age” needs, we are going to be short of space long before 2018.

I’ve been meddling with elements rather new and strange to me and now I will conclude with some more description of the battle to expand by another 6,000 square feet needed to keep our library a viable community centered institution: one which is more to more people than other community projects clamoring for funds, such as senior citizen centers (I am on the advisory committee for that institution), athletic fields, golf courses, swimming pools, etc., etc.

Our liaison man must have studied about how Huey Long early on learned that the bigger the exaggeration, the more it would appeal to voters. He wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper with a 32 point headline “Vote No — Library Expansion.” He signed a hand-bill distributed widely against the library building. The result was that at referendum time less than one thousand out of ten thousand registered voters showed up at the polls. Library patrons had fallen asleep and were so sure that the vote would be affirmative that they believed it was unnecessary to go out and vote. On May 26, 652 to 283 voters put our referendum into oblivion!!!

Our patrons are crestfallen — countless numbers of them have expressed bitterness, sadness, and most of all “mea culpa.” But despair is not written in the mission statement of our public library. If it is not needed in 2018, nothing else in this community will be here to need anything.

So ends the P. L. remembrances of books and libraries and politics. On second thought, I’m afraid that I’m guilty of abusing the term. My 2nd Edition of *Webster’s International Dictionary*, in one sentence gives a double meaning to “politics,” viz.: “the theory and practice of managing or directing the affairs of public policy or of political parties, hence political affairs, principles, conviction; in a bad sense, artful or dishonest management to secure the success of political candidates or parties.” I’ll take the first one.

We mustn’t give up the fight. Virtual libraries do not decrease this need. Public libraries are needed. We ALL have to be better about getting our case across. Libraries are more than access. They are more than ownership. Libraries are a way of life. 🌱